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Article (Accepted Version)

Brown, Christopher (2020) ‘By introducing my culture to someone else, I learnt to understand it again somehow’: an interview with filmmaker Laha Mebow. *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, 6 (2). pp. 293-303. ISSN 2051-7084

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**‘By introducing my culture to someone else, I learnt to understand it again somehow’:
an interview with filmmaker Laha Mebow**

Abstract

As the first indigenous woman to achieve prominence as a filmmaker in Taiwan, Laha Mebow occupies an important place in the island’s film culture. Her first feature, *Finding Sayun* (2011), depicts a village community from Mebow’s own tribe, the Atayal, offering a contemporary response to the 1943 Japanese propaganda movie *Sayon’s Bell*. Her second feature, *Lokah Laqi* (2016), explores the troubled backgrounds of a group of kids growing up in a tribal village, and earned Mebow widespread recognition and awards. Her most recent film, *Ça fait si longtemps* (2017), is a documentary shot in New Caledonia, tracking the collaboration of Taiwanese musicians Suming Rupi and Baobu Badulu with local practitioners, and reflecting on Mebow’s personal connection to the Kanak people. Topics discussed by Mebow in this interview include the dynamics of working within indigenous communities as a semi-outsider, the methods she has developed for training and directing non-professional actors, questions of subjectivity in documentary, and her interest in exploring the connections between Austronesian peoples in Taiwan, New Caledonia, and New Zealand / Aotearoa.

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Keywords

Laha Mebow, Taiwan, indigenous, Atayal, Kanak, Maori

Word Count

3,992

‘By introducing my culture to someone else, I learnt to understand it again somehow’:

an interview with filmmaker Laha Mebow

As the first indigenous woman to achieve prominence as a filmmaker in Taiwan, Laha Mebow (Chen Jieyao) occupies an important place in the island’s film culture. All her feature films depict the experiences of Taiwan’s original inhabitants, known as Taiwan yuanzhumin, who account for around 2.3% of the island’s population, well over half a million people (Executive Yuan, 2020). Mebow, who has Atayal (Taiya) heritage, is amongst a handful of indigenous film directors who have risen to prominence in the last decade, including Lekal Sumi (Lega Shumi) and Umin Boya (Ma Zhixiang). She started her career working for directors such as Tsai Ming-liang (Cai Mingliang) and Chang Tso-chi (Zhang Zuoji), before joining Taiwan Indigenous Television (TITV), and subsequently developing her own projects as a filmmaker.¹

In the twentieth century, Taiwanese indigenous culture was suppressed first under Japanese colonial rule, and later under the Kuomintang (KMT – guomindang), who promoted Mandarin as the island’s official language and restricted indigenous freedoms. Mebow’s films dramatize the impact of this historic legacy on present-day tribes and communities. Her first feature, *Buyiyang de yueguang* (*Finding Sayun*) (2011), depicts the inhabitants of an Atayal village, offering a contemporary response to the Japanese propaganda film *Sayon no kane* (*Sayon’s Bell*) (Shimizu, 1943), which related the romance between a Japanese teacher and an indigenous woman, Sayun (Jp. Sayon, Ch. Shayun), who drowns while crossing a river. Sayun was a real-life figure and is one of Mebow’s ancestors, although the film was fictionalized to portray indigenous tribes as loyal subjects of the Emperor. In 1941, Mebow’s grandmother participated in a sung performance of the Sayun story for Kiyoshi Hasegawa, the Governor-General of Taiwan, who presented a commemorative bell in return.

In the 1990s, the bell emerged as a tourist attraction in Wuta village (Nanao township, Yilan county), and its renovation in 1998 generated opposition amongst the local Atayal community, who objected to the narrow focus of the marketing on Sayun.² In responding to the troubled myth of her ancestor, Mebow is similarly interested in how an external, touristic gaze is cinematically articulated – a mode that, until the last decade or so, was dominant whenever filmmakers sought to depict Taiwan’s original inhabitants. Chang (2009: 646) notes that ‘the cinematic projection of the indigenous, especially by nonindigenous producers, is problematic and is often wrought with exoticism and primitivism’, arguing that *Dengdai feiyu* (*Fishing Luck*) (Tseng, 2005), set on the island of Lanyu, is not exempt from these problems, despite an ostensibly non-exoticizing narrative. Far more controversial was the epic *Saideke balai* (*Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale*) (Wei, 2011), which was praised for dramatizing a previously marginalised history, but criticized for its factual inaccuracies and presentation of indigenous culture as a violent, exoticized spectacle.³

In contrast, Sterk (2014: 209-210) refers to *Finding Sayun* as ‘an indigenous appropriation of primitivism’ that ironically plays with audience expectations, self-consciously constructing an open-ended, modern indigenous identity. This is not to suggest that a touristic impulse is absent from Mebow’s films. On the contrary, her work emblemizes a recent wave of work dramatizing what it means to feel ‘outside’ or ‘inside’ a tribal community. Films such as *Wawa No Cidal* (*Taiyang de haizi / Panay*) (Cheng and Sumi, 2015), *Pakeriran* (*Bakelilan de xiatian*) (Sumi, 2017), and *Zhiyou dahai zhida* (*Long Time No Sea*) (Tsui, 2018) are each structured around a city-dweller’s visit to a rural village – often an indigenous character who returns home. Questions of visibility are built into the narratives of these films, which demonstrate a keen awareness of how the tribes respond to exoticized gazes.

While *Finding Sayun* operates in a similar vein to these examples, Mebow’s next feature *Lokah Laqi* (*Zhiyao wo zhangda / Hang in there, kids!*) (2016) attempts to depict an Atayal

community entirely from within. While acknowledging the inevitability of external mediation, the film is not structured around the experiences of a visitor, but instead focuses on the everyday challenges facing three young kids who live in a rural village. The film earned Mebow widespread recognition and awards, including best narrative feature and director at the Taipei Film Awards. At a time when the Taiwanese government seeks to redress inequalities and to actively promote diversity, *Lokah Laqi* serves as a reminder of the cultural and economic marginalisation still faced by many indigenous communities.

Mebow seeks to offer an authentic representation of indigenous experience not merely through her thematic and narrative choices, but in her approach to filmmaking. Most recent films about Taiwan's original inhabitants are characterized by their use of non-professional actors, motivated by an impulse to authenticity, and the filmmakers' desire to lend agency to the communities represented – both onscreen and off. Recognizing herself as a semi-outsider, Mebow has developed innovative methods of working with non-professionals. As she explains in this interview, she directs in a manner that avoids 'indigenous people learning how to play indigenous people' – an internalizing of external stereotypes, often a risk when performances are directed in line with more commercial methods, rooted in nonindigenous acting theory or coaching. Mebow here outlines an ethical, sustainable form of film practice, through which she develops meaningful relationships with communities, so that she is trusted to return in future.

The director's approach to fiction filmmaking recalls some of the methods associated with participatory and observational documentary. In this sense, it is unsurprising that she has recently adopted the documentary format to explore the connections between Austronesian peoples living in Taiwan and other regions, including the Kanak in New Caledonia and the Maori in New Zealand / Aotearoa. Her latest film *Piaoliu yujian ni* (*Ça fait si longtemps*) (2017), was shot in New Caledonia. In the film, Mebow both initiates and documents the collaboration of Taiwanese musicians Suming Rupi (Shumien) and Baobu Badulu with local practitioners

including Jean-Paul Vama, while reflecting on her personal connection to the Kanak people. However she explains that with hindsight, she would have preferred that the film embedded more of her subjective perspective, rather than prioritizing observation of the musicians.

The following text has been edited from a transcript of a conversation between the author and Laha Mebow that took place on 2 July 2019, in Daan District, Taipei.

Insert Figure 1. Caption: Laha Mebow. © Laha Mebow.

***Christopher Brown (CB):** You didn't grow up in your tribe's village, but at some point you decided to make films about the tribes. How did that happen?*

Laha Mebow (LM): After being posted in TITV, I started to get opportunities to visit different tribes. We didn't make dramas, only documentaries and news features. Prior to this experience, I only knew things about my own tribe – I had no clue about other indigenous people. I began to visit different tribes in Taiwan, seeing lots of situations in different places.

I stayed in TITV for three years. Once I left, I had time to write my first script. I remember my protagonist was a young guy from my village. The next year, young people from our village planned a 'root-tracing' event. You see, our Atayal people, who are one of the high mountain peoples, are the only indigenous tribe living in the mountain foothills, a result of a resettlement policy. I joined the root-tracing expedition and followed our village people, hiking from the plain, all the way up to the high mountain, on unmarked roads. It was really tough; in some places you felt like you were walking on a 90-degree slope. I seldom went mountain hiking back then, and my only motivation was to see where my ancient tribe had lived. That route is exactly the one we later took during filming. It took us two days to get to our destination.

Once I got there, I had this strange, inexplicable feeling. I told the people from my village that I needed to make a film about my tribe. I think that root-tracing event was like an invisible, predestined thread. That was 2008. My camera started rolling the following year.

CB: The Sayun story is interesting because it's become a myth, yet is based on events that are just within the span of human memory. Could you explain how you came to make a film about it?

LM: I was initially only vaguely aware of *Sayon's Bell*. By chance, while I was doing interviews with some elderly people, I suddenly discovered this story and realised that Sayun is from my family – she is my father's aunt.

Around the time of Sayun's death, the Japanese were promoting kominka (Japanization). They picked a few elementary schools to perform for Kiyoshi Hasegawa, then the Governor-General of Taiwan, in Taipei. One of the schools was Luxing Elementary (where the Japanese teacher depicted in *Sayon's Bell* had taught). In fact, when Sayun died, there wasn't a lot of discussion about it. There was only a small column in a Japanese newspaper titled 'Uncivilised Woman Fell Into River, Still Missing'. No one talked about it. But two or three years later, they gave this performance. My Grandma sang the story in Japanese, explaining what had happened. The Governor-General then ordered a bell to be made as a gift. There are photos of my Grandma going to the Taiwan Sotokufu (now the Office of the President) to receive the bell.

Sayon's Bell is very long, but the original events were actually very simple. Her death was purely an accident. People added the romance, as always, something our senior tribespeople weren't happy about. As the river was so close to the ocean, perhaps the missing body was washed into the Pacific. Having a tribe member missing was sad enough, and they felt it wasn't right to turn this story into a romance. The customs between men and women back then were strict, and older generations couldn't contemplate such a thing.

CB: *You open Finding Sayun with the audition footage of the local villagers, which immediately draws attention to the external perspective of Xiao-ru, a visiting filmmaker. Why did you choose her perspective to frame the film?*

LM: I think there are two reasons. Firstly, some of the film's events drew on my own experience of doing interviews in the community. I knew that I hadn't grown up in the community, so I kept a distance when seeking out material from my tribe. Although I'm not external, there was, to be fair, a distance between myself and the tribe. The second reason is that I feel people still hold too many stereotypical views about indigenous people. I wanted to make comparisons from the perspective of an outsider. Hence in *Finding Sayun*, the very beginning of the film features the audition sequences, an external point of view. *Lokah Laqi* approached the opening in the same way. I chose an outsider's, a journalist's point of view.

CB: *Xiao-ru's approach seems unethical. She pesters people and films them without their permission, and wants to film Yukan (Yougan) because he is handsome. I wondered what your thoughts on this were.*

LM: When people come to an indigenous tribe, they always say 'Wow, that one is so handsome, that one is so adorable!'. To be honest, we are indeed quite good-looking people (laughs). But in some cases, when outsiders say someone is extremely handsome, my inner voice asks – are they? From my perspective, they look fairly ordinary. I feel this reflects a situation where I realise other people are looking at us, but differences in our appearance mean that they don't consider anything beyond this. For instance, when I hear them praise a kid from the tribe as being super-cute, I might roll my eyes and think, 'Give me a break, he's really naughty'.

CB: *Many of the actors in your films are non-professionals. How did you cast and work with them?*

LM: With the Grandfather and Yukan in *Finding Sayun*, I went to visit them and chatted with them every Saturday for the six months prior to the shoot. We had a small budget, and it's my own tribe, so the moment I knew I was going to make the film, I took the young man to see the grandpa – to look after his vegetable farm together, and to chat. We didn't do anything related to the script for that six-month period. It was all about the interaction between us, and making them feel they were like a real grandfather and grandson.

Prior to principal photography, it was only me and them. About one month before the shoot, I asked the people who would play the rest of the family to come along, and they did activities and ate together. We started our rehearsals quite late, about one or two weeks before the shoot. To tell the truth, I wasn't too sure whether they could really act, but I did have an instinct. I didn't hire an acting coach, because I was worried that this kind of preparation would result in indigenous people learning how to play indigenous people. Since non-professionals have no clue what acting really is, I'd rather train them on my own, using an approach of you-trust-me-and-I-trust-you. On that note, I didn't let them read the script during the rehearsal, instead I let them understand the story. For a character like Yukan, I made adjustments, adapting the role to fit with the real actor. So you just play yourself, in a sense.

CB: *On Lokah Laqi, you again used non-professionals, along with a few professionals. Was the process of casting and directing similar to on your previous film?*

LM: Some things were similar, but we took more time. We found three kids from three different villages, including Watan (Wadan) who was from my village. I think we went to around ten schools, and saw around 500 kids. As the casting process had different stages, I could only be there for auditions with the local tribes. Other schools filmed their kids and sent me the tapes, and I would check through each one in turn. After my initial selection, I would go to their schools and see them with my own eyes. And for the final round, I'd found five potential lead actresses to work with my shortlisted kids. I thought this would be an interesting way of doing things, as I also needed to decide on my lead actress. They didn't exactly act out scenes from the script. Instead they improvised some scenarios, and I could observe the actresses and kids at the same time. I did this because the kids didn't have any acting experience.

Insert Figure 2. Caption: Poster for *Lokah Laqi* (2016). © Laha Mebow / Skyfilms Entertainment.

CB: *What things did you need to consider when filming your projects with the tribe – were there any rules you needed to follow?*

LM: This is something people need to pay extra attention to when working with the tribes. Generally speaking, people in the tribes are friendly and enthusiastic, so I would say it's about mutual respect. They're happy that people come there and make a film. And there are many things that, as a director, I wouldn't be able to take care of. So I might need someone to borrow stuff, or to ask people to be extras, things like that. Now this doesn't necessarily mean you have to pay them, but you *do* need to let them know that you appreciate their help. So even just a small beverage worth 10 NTD shows a kind of gratitude – this might work just fine. What I want to emphasise is that I tried to build up a close relationship with my tribe, and the other tribes,

because I knew I'd be back. So when our producer arrived, I found some important figures in the tribe and informed them that if they saw something inappropriate, they should let the producer know straightaway. After the production, the crew leave, but I still need to maintain the relationship with the tribes. This is what concerns me.

CB: *You screened Lokah Laqi and Finding Sayun in the villages they were shot. Did the people in the communities like the films?*

LM: We screened the first film in a school hall. During the film, you could see kids running around, jumping up and down, all kinds of noise and excitement. I'm cool with that. For the screening of the second film, we went back to Sqoyaw on the first day of January, and it was freezing. An open-air cinema in winter, at zero degrees. I remember asking myself – don't they feel cold? There was a tribal event happening at the same time, so people came in drunk, and I guess no one was really watching our film. It was like a form of recreation; they came for fun. Really, it doesn't matter. As long as the people who were involved in the film came to see it, that's good. It was pretty much like a temple fair. The feeling of being gathered together is all that matters.

Insert Figure 3. Caption: Poster for *Ça fait si longtemps* (2017). © Laha Mebow / Dot Connect Studio.

CB: *Your latest film, Ça fait si longtemps, seems like a very personal project. You mention in the voiceover that you first went to New Caledonia at a time when you felt that all your tribe's stories had been told. Did your experience with the Kanak people refresh you creatively?*

LM: You say this film is personal, but actually I think it should be *more* personal. For *Ça fait si longtemps* I focused on two musicians, and it turned out that things got too heavy. With hindsight – once filming had wrapped and the edit was locked – I felt this film ought to have been more personal.

I originally imagined and planned an encounter between musicians from Taiwan and New Caledonia. All these documentaries about music made me think that such an encounter would offer many possibilities. However, while I had strong feelings for the island, the Taiwanese musicians' first experience wasn't like mine. They weren't immediately inspired. Instead, their feelings about their experience needed time to settle, before materialising in their music after they returned to Taiwan.

This was supposedly my journey – it was about the relationship between me and that island. But I realised what I did in the film was to follow these two musicians, to see things from their perspective, to capture their different encounters with local musicians. As for me, I only have a voice-over. I do feel, now, that there should have been more of me, participating in the journey. I made a conscious choice that the cameraman should always leave me out of the frame. Once you get used to fiction film production, you always feel that you should stay behind the camera. On the contrary, when you make a documentary, you need to work out why – as in, because of *whom* – you are making the film. So if it's because of you that a film got started, then it's necessary to figure out how to represent *you*. I'm not just talking about recording footage of yourself, but how to make it more personal.

CB: *You said that Suming and Baobu's feelings about New Caledonia didn't materialize in their music until after they returned to Taiwan. Could you talk a bit more about this?*

LM: Half a year later, it started to show in their music. On our trip, I sometimes wondered what they were feeling, especially as they were quite introverted. Now I understand that you need to let things settle. Suming is now recording a new album and giving talks called *Dreaming About Bon Da Da*. The musicians in New Caledonia asked him what a Taiwanese beat is. Suming was struck by this question, as he'd never thought about it. He felt like *Bon Da Da Bon Da Da* (she beats on the table with her hands) was actually the right beat for Taiwan, and he started to work on this project. I think my film created an interaction between the two groups, and the mutual influence really had an impact on them. This impact is more significant than the film itself.

Insert Figure 4. Caption: The musicians in *Ça fait si longtemps* (2017). From left to right: Suming Rupi, Jean-Paul Vama, Baobu Badulu. © Laha Mebow / Dot Connect Studio.

CB: *I gather you are planning another film along similar lines – about the connection between different Austronesian peoples.*

LM: At a film festival two years ago, I met a Taiwanese producer who lives in New Zealand. He wanted to make a co-production about our Austronesian peoples. He found a New Zealand director to co-write a script with me. This director visited Taiwan and I took him on a tour for about a week, to see our Atayal tribes, from Nantou to northern Taiwan. By pure coincidence, this route is really similar to the route our Atayal ancestors took as they moved from settlement to settlement. I mentioned this to the producer, feeling rather like the New Caledonian actor in *Ça fait si longtemps*, who introduced me to their culture. By introducing my culture to someone else, I learnt to understand it again somehow. In May, it was my turn to visit the Maori. In a nutshell, our starting point for the project is indigenous people – Maori and Atayal, ocean and mountains – and we will conjure up a story this year.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank Luc Sung Yu-lun for the translation of this interview. Images are reproduced with the kind permission of the filmmaker.

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¹ Throughout the article, I use the film titles under which work was distributed internationally – so *Finding Sayun*, *Lokah Laqi*, and *Ça fait si longtemps* for Mebow's films. Three films referenced in this article have romanized titles directly transcribed from indigenous languages: *Lokah Laqi* (Atayal), *Wawa No Cidal* (Amis), and *Pakeriran* (Amis). I have prioritized romanization of the Amis and Atayal languages in the referencing, which otherwise lists the Mandarin pinyin followed by English titles. The exception is *Ça fait si longtemps*, which was distributed to English-speaking viewers under a French title.

² For more on Sayun tourism, see Sterk 2014: 213-14.

³ These criticisms are addressed, for example, by Wu (2014) and several contributors in Chiu, Rawnsley and Rawnsley (2017).